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# Teachers and pluralistic education

SIETSKE ROEGHOLT, WIM WARDEKKER  
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Pluralistic education is an educational concept which aims at the development in students of a so-called 'pluralistic attitude'. For its epistemological foundations the concept is based on Dewey and for its educational and psychological underpinning on the Vygotskian tradition. The concepts of *activity*, *dialogue*, and the importance of *diversity* are central. Furthermore, an important tenet is that education can have a real impact on the development of the students.

When invited to react to the concept of pluralistic education, a group of teachers show a certain degree of affinity with it: they all hope to educate their students for a positive participation in a pluriform society. They differ from it, however, in some fundamental ways: in their conception of knowledge, in their stressing of security over insecurity, in their individualistic approach to teaching and learning, and in their quite pessimistic view of the possibilities for making a real contribution to the development of their students.

In this paper, we will report on a research project which is part of a programme called 'pluralistic education'. The concept of pluralistic education is meant to be a contribution to the discussion on what 'good education' is in our pluriform society. The aim of the programme is the elaboration of this concept, as well as the development of concrete examples of pluralistic education in the classroom.

The research project we report on consisted of talks with teachers to investigate their conceptions of education and their responses to the idea of pluralistic education. The argument behind this project is that, if we want to develop concrete examples of pluralistic education, it is of the highest importance to cooperate with teachers. Part of this cooperation will necessarily consist of a dialogue on what exactly pluralistic education is about, and what it looks like in this particular school and for these students. Teachers, of course, will engage in this dialogue from the point of view of their own conceptions of education. So it seemed important to gain some insight into their arguments before actually starting a cooperative project to develop pluralistic education. In this paper, the focus is on these arguments. But to make sense of the account, the reader will need some insight into what we mean by pluralistic education. So, we will start with an explanation of this concept.

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## Pluralistic education

Our work at the Department of Education at the Free University is based on two traditions. One is the sociocultural view of development and education, based on the work of Vygotsky and Leont'ev, and introduced relatively early in the Netherlands by the work of Van Parreren. The other is the continental tradition of pedagogy as a critique of education from the point of view of the interests of the pupils. Based on these traditions, we developed the concept of pluralistic education, which is meant to be a proposal for 'good education' in the pluriform societies we live in. The heart of the concept is, for that reason, the aim to develop in the students a so-called 'pluralistic attitude' (Rang 1993). This does not just mean tolerance. We see our pluriform society not as a society where different groups, each with their own way of life, world-view and opinions, live side by side and should learn to tolerate each other. What is needed is a willingness to engage in a much more active way with diversity, even if this is controversial. Even if we do not meet 'the others' directly in the activities we participate in, their presence means a struggle, a challenge or an invitation to us. Moreover, diversity does not exist only in the differences between 'us' and 'the others'. We all make ourselves part of vaguely defined and overlapping groups, and, by doing so, acquire different ways of knowing the world (in the sense of interpreting or making meaning) that may not always go easily together. The pluralistic attitude that education should foster implies a cluster of discursive virtues, as well as skills that are needed to practise these virtues in daily life. Students need to acquire the willingness and capacity to engage in argument about the interpretation and solution of problems, to critically explore their own contributions, to allow others to point out weaknesses in them, to look for new aspects of the problem at hand, and to listen to what others have to say. The developing of these discursive virtues and skills, however, is not the whole story. Education should try to nurture the willingness, not only to tolerate, but to welcome, the experience that we will never really know for sure 'how things are' or should be, and the kind of insecurity that follows.

Part of the concept of pluralistic education is the conviction that the way one looks at and deals with knowledge in the classroom has an impact on the forming of the pluralistic attitude in the students. To explain what we mean here, we follow Bernstein's argument about objectivism and relativism, and the importance of going beyond them (Bernstein 1983). Objectivism states that there are universal, eternal criteria by which the truth of knowledge can be judged. This prevents us taking seriously ways of knowing the world that are judged not to meet to these criteria. Educational practice nowadays seems to be firmly rooted in a naïve version of the objectivistic conception of knowledge, in the sense that school knowledge is considered to mirror 'reality', and to tell students 'how the world is'. This means that students who see things differently are silenced. Moreover, there is no place (or only a marginal one) for argument. Students learn to take the authority of official knowledge (school knowledge) for granted. This may result in a (false) sense of security.

Relativism seems at first sight to be the only alternative to objectivism. Relativism states that there are no universal, eternal criteria for judging the truth of knowledge, and that for that reason – and this is, according to Bernstein, the heart of the matter – it does not make sense to try to compare and evaluate different ways of knowing the world. Argumentation is useless. At best, a kind of tolerance is developed by such an approach to knowledge, but indifference is another possible outcome.

So, neither objectivism nor relativism is appropriate to develop a pluralistic attitude. For this reason, we are looking for an alternative conception of knowledge. The philosophy of Dewey, which can, unfortunately, only be explained here in the most broad outlines (for further elaboration see Biesta 1992, Garrison 1995 a, b, Prawat 1995), can make an important contribution. Interestingly, the so-called activity theory proposed by Leont'ev (1981) has very similar consequences.

According to Dewey, human beings engage in collective, purposeful transactions with each other and their surroundings. In these transactions, they create and recreate meaning, or knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, becomes the medium in which they shape their transactions, and so their 'world' or 'reality'. New knowledge is required when the habitual meanings and ways of acting are inadequate, i.e. when problems arise. In these situations, people engage in the problem solving activity of inquiry. This is a reflective enterprise in which the participants take a distanced and critical view on their habitual meanings and ways of acting. It is also a dialogical enterprise, in which the participants confront different solutions with each other from the question, What solution works best? This is a 'factual' as well as an evaluative question. So, knowledge is not considered to be value-free, nor based on universal criteria. Knowledge refers to a man-made world and is inextricably linked to evaluations of problem situations and their solution. According to Dewey, scientific inquiry is not essentially different from everyday life forms of inquiry, both in the sense that scientific activities originate in attempts to solve everyday life problems, and in the sense that in both cases the process of inquiry is essentially the same. At the same time, Dewey stresses the importance of scientific inquiry (meant not only as inquiry in the natural sciences, but in all branches of academic studies) because of its systematic and powerful character. We should guard ourselves against a narrowly technological interpretation of this view on the theory–practice relationship. As Dewey states, scientific knowledge not only helps to solve problems, but has the critical capacity to point out problems and to suggest solutions that go against habitual conceptions of how things are and should be.

Leont'ev (1981) and Il'enkov (1977), although writing in a different tradition, make much the same point when they assert that knowledge can never be 'objective' in the sense of lacking a specific perspective. All 'representations of objects in the mind' are mediated by the human, culturally structured activities of which these objects form a part. The 'outside' world, therefore, is always seen in the social historical perspective of particular activities. Since people partake in different activities, and objects can be involved in many activities, objects acquire a 'multi-perspective' character and are endowed with human (cultural) motives

and purposes. So, for Leont'ev, it is not the case that knowledge is a mirror of reality, but the other way round: every object forms a 'mirror' of human activities. Scientific reflection on such objects can give us a deeper insight into the practices behind them, without ever taking away their multi-perspective character.

In the current discourse in education, however, the activity-bound character of knowledge that follows from this theory ('situated cognition', e.g. Lave 1996) has been emphasized more than the multi-perspective character that derives from participating in different activity contexts. As Dewey's theory is also more widely known, we decided to take his views as our point of departure.

Dewey helps us to elaborate our educational concept by offering a non-objectivistic view on knowledge as something that originates in the context of problem situations, and is inextricably bound to our desires, values and intentions. Nor is his view relativistic. He implies that by finding ourselves in a shared problem situation, we have enough in common to engage together in inquiry, in spite of our different outlooks (Bernstein 1983). It is this last point that we want to elaborate.

Dewey did not comment on the fact that there are many different, often conflicting meaning systems that imply different ways of speaking about problem situations, investigating them, formulating solutions, and acting. Without breaking with the idea that people in a shared problem situation have enough in common to be able to communicate, part of the concept of pluralistic education is to stress the diversity of ways of knowing the world. We want to teach students to examine *all* knowledge from questions such as: What ways of acting does this knowledge make possible or impossible? How do we value the results? Who are the people who engage in this or that knowledge? What are their values and intentions? We want to make clear, in other words, that knowledge implies a perspective on the world and its problems, a position from which we look at things, and that it matters which perspective we take. The same goes for scientific knowledge. This is, as Dewey stated, more systematically arrived at. For this reason, it has a special value. But scientific knowledge implies, nonetheless, a perspective on the world that can be critically examined as such. We refer, again, to Bernstein (1983), who, elaborating on Kuhn, stresses the interpretive character of all scientific knowledge.

With this conception of knowledge in mind, we want to understand the task of education not as showing the students 'how things are' by transmitting to them the products of science, nor to hand over to them the methodologies of the sciences as clear-cut, established procedures to be followed, but to invite them to explore different ways of knowing the world: What are their basic concepts, methodology, and forms of argumentation? And, above all, What does the world become when you act in it from the perspective implied in this or that way of knowing? In this sense, the idea of pluralistic education represents a semiotic turn: it is not the world that is the object of teaching and learning, but the way people speak about and act in the world. Of course the students learn about the world this way, but they learn also to realize that this is always a mediated, man-made world.

It will be clear that the concept of pluralistic education is akin to some of the ideas arrived at in the discussions on multicultural education. However, it represents a generalized version of those discussions. The perspectivity of knowledge is seen here not as an accidental property of knowledge in pluralistic societies, but as a fundamental property of knowledge because of its intrinsic connectedness with cultural practices. Although the necessity of the ability to handle multiple perspectives may be accentuated in a specific way in multicultural societies, its importance is not limited to them.

### **The development of the pluralistic attitude**

The concept of pluralistic education needs not only an epistemological grounding, but a psychological one as well. Although our interest in the development of a pluralistic attitude in pupils was first elicited by writings based on German Critical Pedagogy (Hiller 1973, Moser 1978, Rang 1993) we prefer to draw on the sociocultural (or Vygotskian) tradition. This tradition shows a great deal of affinity with Dewey's philosophy in the way it looks at human beings as organisms engaged in interaction (or, as Dewey says, transaction) with their surroundings in the context of collective, purposeful activities, creating meaning while doing so. The sociocultural tradition, however, focuses especially on psychological questions related to ontogenesis: how do children learn and develop, how do they become independent, consciously acting persons? The main tenor of the argument is that children develop by acquiring the meanings of the culture they grow up in. They do so by being engaged in all kinds of social activities, like shopping, laying the table, taking care of a sick sibling, reading, watching television, etc. (Bruner and Haste 1987). The meanings are present on the level of the activity, i.e. the interpersonal level, and embodied in the verbal and non-verbal actions that make up the activity. So it is not necessary for children to have all actions and their meanings at their disposal before they can participate: at first, they participate on the basis of 'a loan of consciousness' (Bruner 1986). The more developed participants in the activity execute the actions that the child has not yet mastered. They help the child to appropriate more and more of these actions. Here, a 'negotiation of meaning' plays an important role. The child does not swallow the meanings passively, but is actively engaged in trying them out. Children approach what is new for them from the perspective of what they already understand. In this process, children internalize (i.e. bring to an intrapersonal level, or make their own) what was at first present on the interpersonal level.

It is against this background that the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' should be understood. Although Vygotsky (1978: 86) describes this concept as the difference between what the child can do independently, and what it can do in cooperation with an adult (or, more generally, with a more developed other person), it is quite clear from the whole of his argument that he saw the interaction between child and adult in the context of social activities (Moll 1990). Various factors are, therefore, important for the nature and scope of the zone. First, there are the

knowledge, skills, desires and preferences of the child in a given moment and situation. Second, the zone depends on the quality of the interaction between the participants in the activity, which has, among other things, to do with the way the 'insiders' attune to the 'newcomers', and vice versa.

Important here is how Vygotsky sees the relation between learning and development (Vygotsky 1986). He states that learning may at a certain moment crystallize in a real change in the way a child experiences the world, i.e. in development. This means that education (formal and informal) has the potential to push development forward. Vygotsky had in mind here the cognitive as well as the affective and volitional aspects of the developing person. He sees an important role for formal education. It is by formal education that the child can acquire so-called 'scientific concepts'. It is not always clear what Vygotsky meant by scientific concepts, and his conception has provoked different forms of criticism (Wertsch 1985, 1991, Wardekker 1991). What is clear, however, is that for Vygotsky scientific concepts consist of consciously held meanings. Scientific concepts represent an important new formation in the child, in the sense that they imply the ability to stand back and reflect on one's actions in the world.

We find it important, especially in our pluriform society, that education should help students to acquire the knowledge that is considered important in the form of 'scientific concepts' in this sense. To us, this means that students learn to be critically aware of the strengths and limitations of this knowledge in dealing with all kinds of problems. A way to do this is to confront different meaning systems, i.e. different ways of looking at the world, of pointing out problems and solving them. The meanings of the students are taken seriously, not only as the starting point of the learning process – by definition something to be changed for the better – but, as other meanings, as ways of dealing with things that can be critically explored. The teacher is seen as 'representative' of the scientific community. The teacher's responsibility is to take care that, for instance, school mathematics is essentially mathematics, although in a form that is appropriate for the students. In the zone of proximal development, he or she takes care of those actions within the mathematical activity that the students have not yet mastered, such as translating daily life problems into mathematical terms, pointing out new problems that surface in the process of solving others, using symbols, reflecting on the process of inquiry, including the quality of the dialogue involved, and evaluating the outcomes. The teacher's task is to hand over these actions to the students. In other words, the practice of pluralistic education consists of engaging students in learning activities that are modelled after different scientific activities (and, of course, artistic and physical activities, but these are beyond the scope of this paper), seen as fields of problem solving, investigation and argumentation in which they can learn to participate in a critical and constructive way (Wardekker 1992, Roegholt 1993, van Oers 1996).

This is not done in just a few lessons or even a few years. Pluralistic teaching and learning processes must be carefully constructed during the whole of a child's school life. The ability and willingness to engage in these kinds of complex pluralistic learning activities should probably be fostered



from the kindergarten years. Van Oers (1994) suggests we conceive the play activities of the children in kindergarten as partially semiotic activities. Within these activities, the teacher invites the children to use language in problem solving, to make representations of situations they encounter, and compare different representations. Much has still to be explored around the question if and how education can indeed develop in the students the complex personality trait we call the pluralistic attitude. Vygotsky's view on the relation between formal education and development, however, opens up the possibility of looking for ways to do so.

## **The research project**

### *The overall approach*

The project<sup>1</sup> was restricted to grades five and six and to the field of social studies (mostly organized as two separate subjects, history and geography). We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 teachers about this field (we spoke with each of them for at least three hours over three or four sessions), using as a starting point two teaching and learning units that were recognized by all of the teachers as useful materials. The starting point of the interviews was the question 'What would you do in your class with these units?' The interviews were conducted on the basis of an item list, including all the elements of educational concepts that were considered important from the point of view of pluralistic education (aims of education, aims, content and nature of social studies as a school subject, the role of teachers and students, teaching styles and approaches, conceptions of (school) knowledge, questions concerning the learning and development of the students, etc.).

### *The two phases of the research project*

The research project was divided into two phases. The focus of the first phase (six teachers) was the content of the educational concepts of the teachers. It seemed desirable to acquire some insight into these concepts before starting the second phase (seven teachers). In the second phase, we set up a dialogue on pluralistic education between the investigators and the teachers. The focus was on the arguments of the teachers and the unfolding of the dialogue. We decided not to explain the concept of pluralistic education to the teachers in theoretical terms and ask them for their opinions, but to confront them with suggestions for other, more 'pluralistic' ways of teaching, and see how they responded. The reason for this indirect approach was that it seemed impossible to make this complex concept and all its implications meaningful to the teachers in a necessarily short period of time. The difference between the two phases was only gradual: in the first phase we confronted the teachers with suggestions for a pluralistic way of teaching, although not in a systematic way; in the second we tried, as in the first, to gain insights into their educational concepts.

### *The selection of teachers*

The aim of the research project was not to give a representative overview of what teachers in the highest grades of the Dutch primary school think about social studies and how they respond to the concept of pluralistic education. The idea was rather to study some clear positions. For this reason, we looked for teachers with an explicit interest in social studies, and with the capacity to reflect on their practice and possible alternatives. Teachers who would agree to participate in this rather time-consuming research project would fall in this category, so we thought. And indeed, all the teachers we spoke with were able to engage in the kind of dialogue we had in mind. They found it an interesting and stimulating experience.

## **Results**

The following description is organized around the question of what the teachers think about knowledge: What kind of knowledge do they find important for their students? How does this relate to their aims of education? What do they think knowledge is? Another important topic, that can however only briefly be discussed within the scope of this paper, is how the teachers see the possibility of contributing to the development of the students.

### *Teachers on knowledge: their pedagogical views*

Most teachers (11 out of 13) see it as part of their responsibility to provide their students with a certain amount of ready knowledge. This consists of definitions and simple facts, but mainly of facts of a more complex nature, for instance the connections between different phenomena (what has Hinduism to do with poverty; why were cities in the middle ages built at crossroads or rivers; what are the causes of acid rain). They give tests to check if the students can reproduce these kinds of facts and factual insights. The two other teachers (Arie and Ed<sup>2</sup>) do not intend to transmit this kind of ready knowledge. They consistently use an inquiry-based teaching approach and never ask their students for reproduction. But what they have in common with their colleagues is the focus on connections between facts. What all teachers share is the intention to provide their students with coherent, structured knowledge as a means to understand the world. They 'weave a net of connections', as one of them expresses it.

There is, however, more to this weaving than simply connecting more and more facts in a structured whole. Values play an important role. Most of the teachers (11 out of 13, 10 of them in outspoken ways), state that they hope to impart values to their students like democracy, equity, cooperation, peace, respect, openness, and a rejection of exploitation. These values are at the centre of a world-view, and understanding the world means acquiring this world-view. They hope that the students will be able and willing to use this view as an orientation for their acting in the world, and as a criterion

for critically judging opinions, ways of acting, etc. For the other group of teachers (three; two of them, Gerard and Henk, were outspoken), a structured way of understanding the world consists in an understanding of cause-and-effect relations, especially as are found in the interaction between (groups of) people. By getting to understand 'the way things work between people', the students will learn how to act or not to act: when you are nasty (violent, greedy, uncooperative, undemocratic, etc.), people will treat you the same way. In fact these teachers also transmit a morality, but this morality is of an instrumental nature and based on self-interest, while the morality of the first group of teachers is ethically grounded.

The teachers present structured knowledge to their students as more or less self-evident. Facts, not only simple facts, but also more complex facts, are treated as 'just being there'. There are quite striking differences between the teachers in the way they treat their basic values (either instrumentally or ethically grounded). For some of them, the scope and meaning of these values is clear-cut, while others are much more tentative. All the same, they all treat these values as obvious, like they treat the facts. There is no reflection on them in any of the classrooms. This does not mean that the teachers are not aware of the danger of a too strongly biased influence on their students. On the contrary: 12 out of the 13 teachers are aware of this problem. 'You cannot bring up the kids in one direction any more', and 'There are always more ways of looking at things' is how two of them express their concern. Some feel the problem acutely and have given it much thought, and all 12 have worked out some kind of solution. An important part of this solution is to carefully choose neutral-sounding words. A second part is to give their classes a balanced account of the position and opinion of all parties in a social problem situation. They use words like 'objective', 'neutral', 'unbiased', 'factual', 'impersonal', and 'nuanced', to indicate the way they intend to teach. Moreover, they speak about the importance of openness and empathy for all parties concerned. This striving for neutrality and openness is not only important in order to avoid undesirable forms of influence, but also to teach students the attitude of giving open-minded attention to different ways of living, thinking and acting, without jumping to quick and easy judgements like 'this is weird' or 'stupid'. The next thing the teachers say they do to avoid being too biased is to leave their students free to choose their own position.

For Gerard and Henk, this solution is consistent with their intention to transmit objective knowledge. For the teachers who want to transmit values, however, it means a tension between desirable and undesirable forms of influence. When it comes to the point, these teachers don't give each party in a conflict the same sort of distanced attention, or the same amount of empathy. They stress, for instance, the poverty and hard work of the Brazilian peasants,<sup>3</sup> while speaking about the landowners and coffee dealers more or less in terms of people 'in the wrong'. The same applies to the positions students take: the teachers take it for granted that these are within the limits of the embraced world-view. A student who says something in favour of the Gulf War is snubbed. A student who agrees with the landowners is called 'a bit stupid'. As was said before, there is a considerable difference in the way the teachers indicate the limits between

acceptable and not acceptable: some of them draw the line firmly, others much more hesitantly. But, again, none of them makes the line an object of reflection for students.

*Teachers on knowledge: their epistemological views*

It is not easy to get a clear sense of the epistemological views of the teachers, because in general they don't speak directly about the nature of knowledge. This is understandable, because the question what knowledge is does not play a role in teacher training, nor in public discussions about education. There are two exceptions in our group of teachers, Leo and Maarten, who make some explicit statements on knowledge. But mostly we have to construct the teachers' epistemological views from their statements on other topics. The aspects of their epistemology that are easiest to reconstruct are the meaning they give to the concept of objectivity, and the kind of relation they see between knowledge and values.

Gerard and Henk, the two teachers who want to transmit objective knowledge, seem to understand 'objective' as 'correctly mirroring reality'. At the same time, 'objective' means unbiased: only if one strives for an objective (unbiased) account of the opinions, positions and actions of different groups of people in problem situations, can one get objective (correctly mirroring) knowledge of the cause-and-effect relations that become visible in the interaction between these groups. In so far as this knowledge does not give clear directions for action, opinions become important. Only then do values come into the picture. This position implies the possibility of separating knowledge and values.

Some of the other teachers come very close to this position. They don't want to transmit objective knowledge. They realize that in their account of social phenomena in the classroom, as well as in other accounts, values have their place. But while these accounts are not objective, they are constructed, so these teachers say, on an objective base of factual knowledge. This becomes clear when we look at the way some of them speak about the coffee unit. Caroline, for instance, says at first: 'The coffee unit just tells the children how things are over there'. But the next moment she says: 'I found it very irritating, our prejudices are very much set up against the landowners'. And Daan says: 'The coffee unit just tells how capitalism works', but also 'It is a bit like in the sixties, isn't it, the innocent workers and the bad landowners'. What they seem to mean is that the facts the author uses to build the story are true or correct, but that the text as a whole is, all the same, coloured by these opinions. They seem to distinguish two domains in accounts of the social world: a domain of 'plain knowledge', that forms the factual knowledge base in these accounts, and a domain of values. The relation between these domains is complex. It is possible to separate them: facts are facts and nothing else, they are not touched by values. But the domain of values nevertheless has an important influence on the story as a whole. It gives, so to speak, a colour or flavour to it. This happens, according to these teachers, by the selection and organization of facts, as well as by the way one puts facts into words. And here they can go wrong,

so they say, in the sense that they make the selection of facts too biased, and betray a too partial stance by their choice of words. They try to avoid these mistakes, as we saw earlier. So, the knowledge base they build their story on is objective in the same two meanings as Gerard and Henk give to this concept. First, the facts are 'true' in the sense that they mirror reality as it is. Second, they are selected, organized and put into words in an unbiased way, so that the factual knowledge base as a whole also correctly mirrors social reality, which is, after all, always complex and conflict-ridden. In the domain of values one can comment on the situation as described by the facts, and discuss the problems at hand. The idea implied is that these comments and discussions only come in the second place, when first the objective knowledge base is put into place. Jaap is the teacher who represents this position most clearly. First, so he says, the students have to get the facts, and only then can they, for instance, express their sympathy for the poor of Brazil. And they should learn a dictionary-like definition of power first, before they can talk about the use and misuse of power. So, the epistemological view of the teachers who take this position is very much the same as that of Gerard and Henk: it is possible to separate (factual) knowledge from values, and 'objective' means 'correctly mirroring reality' as well as 'impartial'. They differ, however, from Gerard and Henk by stating that accounts of social reality as a whole can never be value-free: they consist of values as well as of objective knowledge.

Leo and Maarten most clearly represent a third epistemological position. They never make a distinction between the two domains in what they teach about the social world, and they never suggest that these accounts are based on objective factual knowledge. They never speak about the necessity of gathering enough facts before evaluating a situation. First, so they point out, there is a view on social reality, and only then one constructs one's account by looking for more and more facts, and making it continually more balanced and nuanced. They use the concept of 'objectivity' only in the sense of 'impartiality'. It is interesting that they use the concept of knowledge explicitly in two senses: they speak of Knowledge (with a capital K) to indicate stories about the social world that are inspired by a religious world-view. Knowledge with a small 'k' is factual knowledge. Still, their epistemological position may be not so different from those described above as it seems. They do not seem to pose fundamental questions about the nature of 'facts' or 'knowledge' (small k), but seem to think, just like the other teachers, that facts are just there, and can be found when you look for them.

There seems to be only a gradual distinction between the epistemological positions of the teachers (except Arie, see below). At the one extreme, there are Gerard and Henk who see only objective, factual knowledge and, completely separated from this knowledge, a role for values. Then there is Jaap and the teachers who take the same position as he does: it is possible to distinguish between (factual, objective) knowledge and values, but values play a role in accounts of social reality. Leo and Maarten are at the other extreme. They fully stress the role of values in the construction of accounts of social reality. In this sense, they adhere to a more radically interpretive view of knowledge than the other teachers who acknowledge a role for

values. The other teachers (except, again, for Arie), take a (not always very clear) position somewhere between Jaap on the one hand, and Leo and Maarten on the other: some of them stress the role of values in their accounts as a whole, while others stress the objective knowledge base within these accounts.

The epistemological positions described above do not lead to different ways of dealing with knowledge in daily teaching practice. There are differences, in the sense that most teachers adhere to a quite traditional approach to teaching and let their students learn and reproduce knowledge, while a small minority more or less consistently uses an inquiry-based method and let their students produce knowledge. But when we look closer, in both teaching methods the same view on knowledge surfaces: knowledge consists of facts that are self-evident, and, as such, can be learned and reproduced, or found in sources and put into essays.

Let us take Leo and Maarten as examples of the first group of teachers (traditional teaching method). They realize clearly that their account of social problems as a whole is highly coloured by a certain religious worldview, but this does not lead them to show their students this interpretive character of the knowledge they transmit to them. They never talk with them about the process of selecting and grouping facts, choosing words to get the facts into the story, and the role values play in this process. In their classrooms, as in those of Gerard and Henk, teachers explain and connect facts, while students learn and reproduce them. Comments on the facts and the situation they describe do not seem to have any influence on this core of the teaching and learning process, and the same goes for discussions, if there are any.

Let us look at Ed as an example of a teacher who uses the inquiry-based method. He considers the facts the students find in their sources and use to build their own essays to be as self-evident as the other teachers, because these sources are correct in the sense explained above: they are constructed on a factual knowledge base that objectively mirrors social reality. The students then present their work to their classmates, and, as in other classrooms, it is Ed's task as the teacher to make connections between facts. This view on knowledge that is implicit in the daily practice of teaching leads to a quite individualistic approach to learning. Facts are in textbooks, in the story of the teacher, or in other sources. There they can be found, and then learned or used by the students individually. When teachers speak about cooperation, they mean the bringing together of pieces of factual information the students have available from their daily life experience or from the study of certain sources. The connecting of these facts is, as we said before, the responsibility of the teacher, and, again, each student tries to 'get' these connections by his or her individual effort.

Only one teacher (Arie) seems to have a really different view on knowledge and to succeed, at least sometimes, to translate this view into a teaching approach. He speaks about knowledge as a perspective on reality. In the perspective he adheres to, power is a central organizing concept, and one cannot speak of power, according to him, without taking a value position. So he adheres, like Leo and Maarten, to an interpretive conception of knowledge. However, he seems to break with a view on facts as

things that are ‘there’, as part of a reality that is ‘there’. He seems to go in the direction of a view on ‘facts’ and ‘reality’ as things that are experienced according to the perspective one takes. In the same time, he comes to a more collective view on learning. He invites his students to take on a certain perspective, and to investigate what they see and experience when they do so. For instance, he gives them the task of writing about a conflict they had, using the word power. Then the class reflects on what power is, and by exploring together in this way the concept of power, the students learn to experience their lives differently. When they grow older, they can look from the same perspective at complex social problems, or so is Arie’s intention.

### *Teachers and pluralistic education*

As we said above, we presented to the teachers, especially in the second phase of the research project, suggestions for a more pluralistic teaching approach. The suggestion that caused the most lively response concerned the issue of dealing with textbooks or other classroom materials. It proposed not to present these texts to the students as factual accounts to be understood and learned, but as possible positions, taken by an author, towards problem situations. The idea was that the teachers would invite their students to ask the author of a text questions: What has been your aim when writing this text? What are your values? What do you see as facts? How do you organize your argument? What follows is restricted to the responses of the teachers to this suggestion.

We made this suggestion when talking about the danger of undesirable forms of influence. We asked if the teachers did not, in that context, see the strong value position of the coffee unit as problematic. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to teach the students to discern and explore this position? Most teachers said that the students do not recognize the colouring of a text (‘for them it is just true what they read’), and that this is a good thing in respect to the problem of undesirable influences: in this way, the author does not touch them with his opinions. This shows us something about the way the teachers normally use textbooks, and how they see their own task in relation to the textbook. The textbook delivers factual knowledge, while it is their task to weave a net of connections and build the way of understanding the world that they seek to transmit. They, as adults, look through the value orientation of a text. On the strengths of this analysis, they can reject texts of parts of them. But for the students, texts are sources of facts and nothing else. Karel says so explicitly: ‘It doesn’t interest me at all what the author has to say. I tell the story, this is my power as a teacher, to decide what I transmit.’ Though it is an important aim of almost all of the teachers to develop a critical attitude in their students, this does not apply to the texts they use in their teaching. For instance, Ed expresses his main aim in this way: ‘I want the children to learn to ask themselves again and again the question: “Is this true for me?”’ But concerning the use of written sources, his aim is very different: ‘I want them to ask themselves: “Do I understand this?”’ When dealing with texts in the classroom as sources of factual knowledge, it doesn’t make sense to ask questions of the authors.

When the teachers nevertheless reflect on our suggestion, we see two tendencies. First, they approach it as related to the question of how to help the students to form their own opinions. If the students can figure out the opinion of the author, this can result in a classroom discussion. Discussions, however, tend to stay within the individualistic approach to learning that was mentioned above: students learn skills and attitudes like listening to each other, phrasing their contributions clearly, and giving arguments for them. But this does not lead to a cooperative exploration of the different opinions and arguments. Neither the position of the author, nor those of the students themselves are analysed in a collective process of asking questions and trying to find answers. The students are supposed to take home what they heard, so to speak, and then figure out what they want to do with it. To form and change opinions is considered as something quite private, not as part of a collective process of constructing knowledge. The second tendency we see is a switch in focus from the position of the author to the positions of the people in the problem situations treated in the texts. The question is not how we handle the position of the author of the coffee unit, but how we respond to those of the peasants, the landowners and the coffee dealers. In this context, the teachers state again (a bit impatiently: 'we already talked about this') how important it is to give a nuanced account of all these positions.

### *Teachers on the development of their students*

Another important argument the teachers use is that engaging in dialogue with authors is too difficult for their young students. They do not approach our suggestion from the point of view how they can prepare their students for the learning of the complex skills and attitudes needed for such questioning of texts, but from the abilities the students have right now. This poses questions about how the teachers see their role in the development of the students. All of the teachers seem to be quite pessimistic in this respect. While some of them are optimistic about what the students can learn, in the sense that they can reproduce important insights in their own words, none of them expects to have a real impact on their cognitive and moral development. They all have aims like teaching the students to make connections between facts, to be able and willing to make their knowledge more nuanced, to be open-minded, and to act according to important values, but they do not see a real possibility of furthering these aims. They see what students can do as, to a significant degree, limited by their age, or as a product of maturation. They see the development of the students as mainly determined by factors that are beyond their control, like the influence of the family and the neighbourhood, class and ethnic background, and intelligence. So, the only thing a teacher can do is tune in to the capacities, attitudes and motives of their students, and follow their development. Against this background, their evaluation of pluralistic education as 'too difficult' is understandable.



## Conclusions

There are important points of affinity between pluralistic education and the educational concepts of the teachers we spoke with: their concern for the problem of undesirable forms of influence on the students, their stressing of many-sidedness and nuance, their striving for openness, and their intention to get the message to the students that what is different is not 'weird'. These teachers want to educate the students for a positive participation in our pluriform society, which is exactly what we hope for. In the way the teachers try to further this aim, however, they profoundly differ in some respects from the concept of pluralistic education. There is no trace in their educational concepts of a semiotic turn: students learn about the world, they do not study different ways of knowing, nor do they explore what this or that way means for the acting in and the making of the world. There is, at least in the teaching practices of the teachers, no critical approach to knowledge, nor a sense of the provisional nature of knowledge. Almost all of them handle knowledge in the classroom as something apart from values, and suggest to their students that it is possible to get the knowledge right. The way they help the students to learn about the world is meant to promote a sense of certainty, or so it seems: if you know how the world is, you know, at least in broad outline, what to think and how to act. Pluralistic education, on the other hand, wants the students to learn to handle the uncertainty that comes with the insight that there is no ultimate authority in knowledge. A very important difference is, furthermore, that the teachers do not see a possibility of contributing to the development of their students, while the idea that formal education can extend the cognitive, moral and volitional development of children is central to pluralistic education and the sociocultural tradition in which this concept is articulated. The teachers say that pluralistic education is too difficult for their young students, instead of looking for ways to promote the qualities that are needed to participate in pluralistic education. What is, moreover, completely missing in their accounts, is the idea that it is possible to organize the learning activity already in place as pluralistic education, although the students do not yet individually possess the qualities to participate, provided that they as teachers take care that these qualities are present on the interpersonal level of the learning activity. More generally, there is hardly any trace in the educational concepts of the teachers of a notion of learning as a collective endeavour.

These traits of the educational concepts of these teachers are probably not just characteristics of their individual thinking, but deeply rooted in the traditional way of looking at education. This poses, of course, a problem for the development of concrete examples of pluralistic education in the classroom. It is not the subject of this paper to suggest solutions to this problem. Moreover, only practical experience can teach us how to deal with it. The only thing we can say here is that it will probably be important to begin by stressing the points of affinity, and to argue that the concept of pluralistic education offers a more consistent way to promote the aims of education that are shared by teachers and researchers alike, than the usual

teaching practices. From there, it may be possible to build a broader basis of mutual understanding during the process of collaboration.

## Notes

1. A full description of the project and its results is given (in Dutch) in Roegholt (1995).
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. One of the teaching and learning units we used as a starting point for our talks with the teachers was about the production of coffee in Brazil and the world trade in coffee.

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